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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the four major changes that have taken place in the Israeli Matriculation Examinations since the early 1950's. Before the changes, students at the end of the 10th grade took three mandatory examinations, and students at the end of the 12th grade took four mandatory examinations and two examinations that depended on the course of study. The first change, toward the end of the 1950's, involved the following: examinations at the end of grade 10 were cancelled, additional courses of study were allowed, every student could substitute one examination with an annual composition, and six external mandatory examinations were taken. The second change, in 1965, involved the following: five external examinations were taken, two school-assessed mandatory examinations were added, and a school-leaving certificate would be granted to those who failed some or all of the examinations. The third change, in 1978, involved the following: subjects were divided into study units, students could choose the level of their studies and examination in each subject, students could take the examinations 1 or 2 years prior to graduation, and in order to earn the matriculation certificate, students had to study and be tested on at least 20 study units. The fourth change included restrictions to the third change and involved the following: examinations on 15 study units were mandatory in five prescribed subjects. Background factors for these changes are outlined from the following perspectives: social-political circumstances, school autonomy, parents, teachers' attitudes, the Ministry of Education, the universities, and psychometricians. (RLC)

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STAGES IN THE REFORM OF THE MATRICULATION EXAMINATIONS IN ISRAEL

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Josef Lewy: **STAGES IN THE REFORM OF THE MATRICULATION EXAMINATIONS IN ISRAEL**

The Israeli Matriculation Examinations ("Bagrut") are of great importance to the teaching and learning in the Israeli schools. In fact, their influence is great not only on the educational system, but on the whole society as well.

These school leaving external examinations have been widely criticised in Israel. The criticism is based on several aspects, educational, social and political. Many of the critics called for the total cancellation of these examinations. The Ministry of Education did not accept it and instead decided to improve the examinations in several ways - in format, contents and requirements.

As from the early fifties, soon after Israel gained independence, untill now, four major changes in these examinations took place.

The format of the examinations in the early fifties, in general outlines, was as follows:

At the end of grade 10 (the age of 16):

Three mandatory exams (somewhat similar to the British O-level).

At the end of grade 12 (the age of 18):

Four mandatory exams for all and two mandatory exams decided upon according to the course of study (arts, science or commercial) (somewhat similar to the British A-level).

Change no 1 (towards the end of the fifties)

a. Exams at the end of grade 10 were cancelled.
b. Additional courses of study were allowed (agricultural, pedagogical and judaic courses).
c. Every student may substitute one examination with an "annual composition".

This format consisted of six external mandatory examinations.

Change no 2 (1965)

a. The number of external exams was reduced from six to five (one of which must be on a higher level).
b. In addition: Two school-assessed mandatory examinations.
c. A school-leaving certificate will be granted to those who

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failed in part or in all the exams.

Change no 3 (1978)

a. In each subject the studies were divided to 'study-units'. Each 'study unit' requires three weekly lessons throughout a year. Each subject may be taken in one of several levels, e.g. low level (1-2 study-units), high level (5-6 study--units).
b. Every student may choose for each subject the level for his studies and examination.
c. Students are free to take parts of the exams ever one or two years prior to graduation.
d. Students may decide upon the subjects and the level within each subject they want to take. (but, they must include four mandatory subjects at least at the lowest level).
e. In order to earn the Matriculation Certificate (Bagrut) the students have to study and be examined on at least 20 study--units.

Change no 4

Restrictions to change no 3: Examinations on 15 study-units are mandatory in five prescribed subjects, namely: Hebrew, Mathematics, English, Bible and Jewish History. If one wants to take, say, the minimum of 20 study-units, he is free to choose only five of them.

Some of the background factors for these changes will be mentioned here in outline.

1. Social-political factors

The number of secondary school students studying till graduation increased steadily over the years. In recent years the secondary school studies are free (but compulsary only to the age of 16). Nowadays about 95% of the age group study untill graduation (at the age of 18). The public wants to see higher percentages of graduates who earn the Bagrut .Certificate (it is now about 55% of the graduates). This explains the gradual increase in facilities from change no 1 to change no 3. Change no 3 can actually be considered as

a principal move from "Equality in Education" (equal demands for achievement in school and in the Bagrut exams for all) to "Equal Opportunities for All in Education" (each student is free to choose the subject and the level of studies and examination). This resulted in increasing numbers of disadvantaged students who succeeded in earning their Bagrut Certificate.

2. School' autonomy

Schools want more freedom in teaching and educating their students. The tendency is to move from centralism in the educational system, to decentralism. Hence their pressure for more school-assessed exams and for substituting exams with "annual compositions".

3. The parents

Over the years an ever increasing involvement of parents in education took place. Parents want their children to acquire the Bagrut Cretificate which will enable further higher education or better jobs. Parents, therefore, even exerted pressure to reduce the demands, give more possibilities for school-assessment and more freedom for students to choose subjects and levels of examination. Hence one of the reasons for change nos. 1, 2 and 3.

4. Teachers' attitutes

Many teachers oppose the changes because of several reasons, e.g.:
a. The feeling that, especially change no 3, will decrease the standard of learning in school.
b. The natural fear of having to cope with new and unfamiliar curricula and innovations. In a way this was also one of the reasons for introducing the restrictions in change no 4.

5. The Ministry of Education

a. The tendency to deal with school effectiveness is on the agenda of the Ministry recently. Matriculation exams' results may serve as one of the tools for establishing school effectiveness. Hence the

restrictions in change no 4.
b. These restrictions might enable more comparability (which was not possible after change no 3).
c. The freedom to choose the subjects and the levels within each subject, caused the necessity to provide 870 different examination papers last year! This proved to be much beyond the administrative capabilities of the Ministry of Education. It is almost impossible to construct so many papers, draw feedback, grant grades and decide for each student his qualification for the Bagrut Certificate.
All this definitely caused change no 4 with its restrictions.

6. The Universities

Since the universities use the Bagrut grades as an indicator for future success of the students in higher education, and since they want to get well prepared students for higher education - they exerted considerable pressure to increase the standard required in the Bagrut examinations, especially in Mathematics and English.
This was also one of the reasons for changing to change no 4.

7. Psychometricians

Psychometricians are not very happy with several points. Such as:
a. The content validity of the exams is not yet properly established.
b. It is almost impossible to establish comparability, even in the same subjects, over the years.
c. There still are problems of attaining proper scoring reliability.
d. Not much was done to use the feedback obtained for improving the instruction and learning in secondary schools.
This, too, brought to the decision of restrictions in change no 4.

It seems that so long as there will not be an agreed definition as for the aim of the Israeli Bagrut Examinations, one can expect more changes in the future.

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